

The politics of disagreement

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How comprehensive can a history of modern French political thought claim to be? Jeremy Jennings has undertaken to capture the complexity of modern French politics in ten thematic chapters.

Reviewed: Jeremy Jennings, *Revolution and the Republic. A History of Political Thought in France since the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, 548 pp.

There could be few more daunting tasks for the historian of France than trying to capture the complexity of modern French politics. There may be more than a little hubris in the claim that France was the crucible of modernity but it is hard to dispute the impact developments in French politics have had on the world. From the rabble-rousing of the *philosophes* and the violence of the Terror, to Napoleon's conquest of Europe and Sartre's existentialist musings, France can justly claim to have been at the cutting-edge of global politics. Above all, France bequeathed to the world a bewildering array of political symbols, languages, ideas and debates.

The problem is that the French themselves have rarely agreed on the meaning of politics, let alone the meaning of specific events such as the Revolution or the Commune. This means that, before we can even begin to approach the question of what actually *happened* in French politics, we have to understand what people *thought* was happening. This is where Jeremy Jennings's vast 500-page book comes into its own. With his encyclopaedic knowledge, he is able to guide us through some of the most impassioned debates in modern French politics. This is not, strictly speaking, an essay; it does not have a clearly-defined argument. Rather, it is an examination of the most important political thinkers in modern France brought together in ten thematic chapters.

A nineteenth-century liberal perspective

Even if Jennings eschews a straightforward chronological approach, he unambiguously locates the start of his narrative in the French Revolution. There are frequent references to the eighteenth-century but the axis around which the story turns is the debate over the political community that emerged from the upheavals of the decade following 1789. The battle to understand and claim the Revolution thus becomes the necessary point of departure for almost every one of the themes that Jennings chooses to examine in more detail: representation, sovereignty, universalism, science, insurrection, engagement... We are quickly made to understand that the weight of France's revolutionary legacy has been overwhelming.

There can be little disagreement about this fundamental reality of modern French political thought. But Jennings goes further in his interpretation. He has clearly been influenced by the concerns of a whole generation of contemporary French historians and political theorists who have reflected on the paradoxes of modern French politics. The most prominent of these is Pierre Rosanvallon, references to whom appear in the book's opening pages, but one can also discern the traces of ideas developed by François Furet and Claude Lefort. Refracted through the work of these scholars, the narrative becomes one about the battle for the 'indeterminate' nature of representation in a democratic society, what Lefort would have called the *lieu vide*. Jennings insists that the key challenge for modern French political thought has been to identify and pacify this volatile *lieu vide*.

In the light of these concerns, it makes sense that the central chapter – and one of the longest – is devoted to 'History, Revolution, and Terror'. It is these three themes that dominate Jennings's vision of French politics: how can the political community forge a consensual history beyond revolution and violence? Of course, these were also the concerns of French thinkers such as Mme de Staël, Guizot, Tocqueville, Constant and Michelet, all of whom receive significant attention. Inevitably, this choice of authors gives nineteenth-century France distinctly 'liberal' overtones, a view that is reinforced by the rich discussion of early nineteenth-century liberalism in the chapter entitled 'Commerce, Usurpation, and Democracy'. Still, both students and scholars will welcome Jennings's sophisticated treatment of thinkers who are obviously close to his heart and they will admire how, in his chapter on 'Religion, Enlightenment, and Reaction', he deftly teases out the differences between thinkers to support a nuanced reading of nineteenth-century Catholic thought in France.

Others will be less satisfied, however. The most striking feature of *Revolution and the Republic* is the extent to which it is built almost entirely around nineteenth-century personalities and concerns. The last chapter – entitled 'France, Intellectuals, and Engagement' – takes the story rushing through the interwar period to the 1990s in the space of only 50 pages. Had the book been marketed as a history of nineteenth-century political thought, this would have been perfectly acceptable; in the event, it raises a number of issues about the book's conclusions. The cursory treatment of the twentieth century implies that the majority of key debates in French politics had, at the very least, been exhaustively addressed by 1918. Whatever came next – whether it was the Popular Front, Vichy, Gaullism or socialist rule in the 1980s – was little more than a rerun of older divisions and disagreements. The remarkably brief discussions of Aron or Foucault contrast sharply with the painstaking reconstructions of a whole host of nineteenth-century figures. But why neglect twentieth-century political thought when it could have given further strength to an argument about the struggle to define a French political community? Even if one were to remain within the confines of the chapter headings provided by Jennings, there would have been ample room for a challenging discussion of the twentieth-century.

The least satisfying chapter in this regard is almost certainly the one on 'Universalism, the Nation, and Defeat'. Here the limitations of a nineteenth-century perspective are most evident. To take only one example, how might Jennings have modified his argument with a consideration of the calamitous military defeats in France in 1940, in Indochina in 1954 and in Algeria in 1962? All of these brought the Republic to its knees and left scars that ran at least as deep as those of, say, Waterloo in 1815. On two occasions, they also precipitated what could plausibly be described as 'revolutions'. They reshaped the French political landscape and gave rise to (frequently violent) debates about the nature of the

national community, forms of representation, and what it meant to be French. They would thus be perfect candidates for inclusion in a narrative about the battle for representation.

Forgotten traditions: Marxism, Gaullism and Empire

More generally, the marginalisation of the twentieth-century makes it possible for Jennings to sideline two major political traditions. The first is twentieth-century Marxism and Communism. The author follows Tony Judt in hastily dismissing these movements at the end of the chapter on ‘Insurrection, Utopianism, and Socialism’. This is a shame as, whatever one’s opinions of mid-twentieth century *marxisant* intellectuals, their intense dialogue with and through Hegel transformed French – and, later, American – political thought.¹ In a rather different vein, the Parti Communiste Français and its disciples had at least as much of an impact on postwar French political life as Tocqueville or Michelet had on the second half of the nineteenth-century (if not more). The varieties of French Marxism deserved a more careful treatment that would have situated them in traditions of intellectual engagement and post-revolutionary protest politics in France.

The other political tradition that is sacrificed is Gaullism. One might object that de Gaulle was an actor rather than a thinker. But the General would be justifiably surprised to find that there are more references in the book to Montalembert or Prévost-Paradol than there are to him. This is all the more surprising because de Gaulle’s unique blend of Bonapartist universalism, prophetic attempt to embody France, and electoral appeal make him an ideal case study of how political thought and myth have interacted, as well as suggesting ways in which French politics has been able to transcend the divisive legacy of the Revolution.² It is surely significant that the most famous French politician of the twentieth-century scarcely mentioned it at all!

Lastly, one area that undoubtedly merited greater discussion is the relationship between France and its empire, not least because of the outpouring of polemical and academic scholarship to appear on the subject in recent years. Again, the chapter on ‘universalism’ seems a missed opportunity, although one would need an entire chapter on the subject, perhaps entitled ‘Imperialism, Race, and Conquest’. This would be the place for an analysis of, for instance, Toussaint L’Ouverture’s appropriation of the French Revolution, the powerful interaction between republicanism, racism and imperialism during the Third Republic, or the critical literature of *négritude*. As contemporary historians have repeatedly stressed, it was outside the borders of the Hexagon that French political thought was put to the test. Would the French abide by their republican principles in Algiers or Dakar? What, in practice, did citizenship mean? To what extent did the deep desire to spread France’s glory abroad undermine the revolutionary ideology on which this very desire was built?³ Without

¹ This dialogue with Hegel is clearly laid out in Vincent Descombes, *Le Même et l’autre: quarante-cinq ans de philosophie française (1933-1978)*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1979.

² For an interesting perspective, see S. Hazareesingh, *Le Mythe gaullien*, Paris, Gallimard, 2010.

³ The complex interaction of empire, race and politics in modern France has been extensively addressed by a number of French and non-French scholars working on different parts of the French Empire. For a small selection of this recent work, see for instance A. Conklin, *A mission to civilize: the republican idea of empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (London: Stanford University Press, 1997), C. R. Paligot, *La République raciale: paradigme racial et idéologie républicaine (1860-1930)* (Paris: PUF, 2006), T. Chafer, *The end of empire in French West Africa: France’s successful decolonization?* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), R. Branche, *La guerre d’Algérie: une histoire apaisée?* (Paris: Seuil, 2005), Y. Scioldo-Zurcher, *Devenir métropolitain: politique d’intégration et parcours de rapatriés d’Algérie en métropole (1954-2005)* (Paris: Editions EHESS, 2010), L. Dubois, ‘La République Métissée: Citizenship, Colonialism, and the Borders of French History’ in

an adequate examination of these issues, Jennings's suggestive conclusion on 'Citizenship, Multiculturalism, and Republicanism' appears shorn of its historical and conceptual context.

We should be clear at this point: these omissions do not take away from the book's outstanding erudition and scope. This is likely to become a reference in its field and it is all too easy with a work of this scale to find topics that have received inadequate treatment. Nevertheless, the book's blindspots fundamentally alter its appeal. It may be that, since scholars such as Rosanvallon have had relatively little to say about French imperialism or Gaullism, these did not seem to be of primary importance to Jennings in the elaboration of his central argument. Or it may be that he has made a deliberate choice to concentrate on nineteenth-century debates that have unequivocally transformed French political culture rather than more recent debates, the effects of which remain unclear. Either way, readers picking up this wide-ranging and stimulating book should be aware that, for all its qualities, it remains a partial view. Of course, one might say that this is very much in the spirit of the arguments that form the basis of Jennings's narrative. The vast majority of nineteenth-century historians who aspired to write 'complete' histories of modern French politics failed (or never finished). This being the case, we should thank Jennings for rising to the challenge and reopening a much-needed discussion about the roots of French political thought.

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